

Genre-Hybridization – a Key to Hyper-Bestsellers?

The use and function of different fiction genres in
The Da Vinci Code and *The Millennium Trilogy*

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Abstract

The majority of the novels that during the first decade of the 2000s became hyper-bestsellers share one thing in common: They tend to be genre-hybrids, mixing several different, often popular, fiction genres. This is true for *Harry Potter*, *The Da Vinci Code*, *Twilight*, and a number of other hyper-bestseller phenomena of recent years. The thesis of this article is that genre-hybridity is a fundamental feature that contributes to a novel's success by causing it to attract a larger and more diverse audience, and in so doing makes it stand out from most "regular" bestsellers.

In this article, the concept of the hyper-bestseller is introduced and outlined, followed by a comparative analysis of the use of different fiction genres and sub-genres in two of the most successful hyper-bestsellers of recent times, both of which exhibit strong links with the crime fiction tradition: Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* and Stieg Larsson's *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. The two novels are found to share many genre-related features, in particular, their dynamic detective duos, feminist agendas, anti-authoritarian attitudes, political criticism, exoticism, and religious elements. A majority of

the shared genre conventions are also found to enable a strong sense of reader identification with the detective characters.

Keywords hyper-bestseller, genre, genre-hybridity, crime fiction, Dan Brown, Stieg Larsson.

The concept of hyper-bestseller

To describe and classify the most successful works of fiction from recent decades – those that have succeeded beyond even the status of bestseller or blockbuster – the concept of *hyper-bestseller* is introduced here.¹ The list below defines its main features:

1. A popular cultural phenomenon
2. Originates in a novel / a series of novels, which turn / s into something much bigger than the average No. 1 *New York Times* best-seller
3. Translated into a large number of languages
4. Sells in many millions of copies
5. Turned into blockbuster films
6. Adapted for several other media formats
7. Attracts enormous international popularity and fan culture
8. Known also to people who have not read the original novel / novels or approached the text through its remediations
9. Attracts extensive attention by media
10. Attracts extensive attention by scholars

The majority of novels that during the first decade of the 2000s became hyper-bestsellers share one thing in common: They tend to be genre-hybrids, mixing several different, often popular, fiction genres. This is true for *Harry Potter*, *The Da Vinci Code*, *Twilight*, *The Millennium Trilogy*, *The Hunger Games*, *Fifty Shades of Gray*, and a number of other hyper-bestseller phenomena of recent years. There are many other factors that contribute to turning a novel into a hyper-bestseller, not least factors of promotion and distribution. The thesis of this article is, however, that genre-hybridity is a fundamental – and so far under-explored – feature that contributes to such a novel's success by causing it to attract a larger and more diverse audience, and in so doing makes it stand out from most "regular" bestsellers.

As crime fiction in particular has grown to dominate the international fiction market during the last decade, I will compare the use of different fiction genres and sub-genres in two of the most successful hyper-bestsellers of recent times, both of which exhibit strong links with the crime fiction tradition: Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) and Stieg Larsson's *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2005)² from his *Millennium Trilogy*.³ By comparing how these novels employ different fiction genres and sub-genres, I hope to be able to identify what they share in common in terms of use and mixture of genre elements – and which, furthermore, arguably constitute an important ingredient in their success and status as hyper-bestsellers.

Popular fiction has always had a strong bond to concepts of genre, closely following specific genre rules, traditions, and patterns. In the wake of post-modernity, however, the borders between different genres have become much more permeable.⁴ This applies also at the level of sub-genres. Indeed, to look at crime fiction today, it is hard to find an archetypal whodunit, psychological thriller, or police procedural, as most crime writers now use elements from more than one sub-genre.⁵ Readers and audiences today possess extensive knowledge concerning what characterizes different genres, and can thus often also identify genre patterns and conventions in fiction where several genres are mixed. Studying genre use in *Harry Potter*, Anne Hiebert Alton concludes that genre today is much more than a "classification tool," it has rather become a "communication system":

Because of their conscious or unconscious awareness of the various genres fused in the books, readers gain the delight of recognition as they read something that feels familiar in form: they know the conventions of the game, or the story, before they begin, and thus are looking for the tags, or signs. (Alton, 2009, p. 221)

To be able to recognize elements from different genres, as well as references to specific works of popular fiction, might even constitute part of the attraction for the reader.

When Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* was published in 2003, he was already an established author with three novels to his name. However, it was the above novel that propelled him into becoming a hyper-bestseller phenomenon. Despite being quite similar to his earlier *Angels & Demons* (2000),⁶ the more controversial content of *The Da Vinci Code* was probably crucial in making it more successful than

the former. It could also be argued that the timing was riper for this kind of novel to become a hyper-bestseller, as crime fiction – widely defined – was just starting to eclipse all other genres in terms of popularity. A couple of years later, in 2005, when Larsson's *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* was first published, the novel was thus "carried" by the still growing popularity of crime fiction, and in particular on the back of Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*. Nordic crime fiction was also beginning to become known as a concept in its own right, and the translation of Larsson's *Millennium Trilogy* paved the way for opening up the international market to Nordic writers. Although already popular in many European languages, English-language sales of Larsson's novels (released in English 2008–2009) were unprecedented for a Nordic crime writer. That it was the *Millennium Trilogy* – and not, for example, Henning Mankell's Kurt Wallander novels or Jo Nesbø's Harry Hole series – that became a hyper-bestseller phenomenon, can in all likelihood be attributed to the extensive genre mixture of Larsson's novels (cf. the more extensive discussion in Bergman, 2013, pp. 51–53).

A cultural thriller packed with whodunit elements, and a whodunit turned serial killer thriller

The main structure of *The Da Vinci Code* is based on the political thriller (the thematic content, however, qualifies it primarily as a cultural thriller) with a dominating "on the run" motif, where the heroes are both hunters and hunted, and where the suspense is built up around the constant threats that keep them running. To this basic structure, Brown adds a number of riddles and puzzles to be solved for his heroes to keep momentum and stay ahead of their pursuers.⁷ The types of codes and puzzles used by Brown commonly belong to the classic detective story or whodunit. In these sub-genres, the puzzles give rise to a pause in the developments of the narrative. While this pause traditionally delays the solving of the case, in Brown's novel it contributes to the tempo by adding suspense. Unlike the classic whodunit, *The Da Vinci Code* contains not one puzzle-like mystery, but a series of mysteries and codes that need to be solved by the protagonists under extreme time pressure so as to survive, solve the initial murder, and complete what turns out to be a search for the Holy Grail.

In *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, genre associations progressively change. The initial mystery of the disappearance of a girl from an isolated island places the novel primarily in the whodunit sub-genre. Later events and genre elements eventually turn it into what is essentially a serial killer thriller. The transition between genres is a gradual process, but the final crossing of the line is clearly marked by several genre-related markers (Bergman, 2013, pp. 49–50). Larsson also uses the occasional riddle/puzzle in his novel, the foremost example being a list of names and numbers found in the missing girl's diary. These are believed to be (encrypted) phone numbers, but eventually they are deciphered as references to passages in the Bible, which, in turn, refer to a series of murdered women (Larsson, 2011, pp. 171, 252–253). In Larsson's case, the riddle thus illustrates the transformation from one sub-genre to the other, from whodunit to serial killer thriller, rather than constituting a driving force for the action. Although these are the main genre structures and affiliations characterizing the two novels, both contain an additional number of genre references and elements – from different crime fiction sub-genres and other (mainly) popular fiction genres. Gunhild Agger has, for example, convincingly demonstrated Larsson's extensive use of the melodrama (another genre common in hyper-bestsellers) as crucial for his success (Agger, 2010, *passim*).

Dynamic detective duos and feminist agendas

Both Brown and Larsson chose a man-woman combo of amateur detectives as their protagonists. Robert Langdon and Mikael Blomkvist are investigating academics, respectively a symbologist/art historian and journalist, while the women have ties to professional investigation in their line of work – Sophie Neveu as a cryptologist employed by the police (although running from the police during the events of the novel), and Lisbeth Salander freelancing as an investigator for a private security firm. In Brown's case, it could be argued that the man-woman combo might attract more women readers to the thriller genre; in Larsson's, it might attract women to the kind of crime novel that conveys social and political criticism, another important sub-genre incorporated in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. Crime fiction is in many senses a traditionally male genre, and many of its sub-genres still have a predominantly male readership, despite the general tendency for women to be greater con-

sumers of novels. Furthermore, the dual gender combo enables a traditional romantic motif, something that both authors take advantage of. In classic detective fiction, romance tended to be avoided unless it was part of the motif for murder. In recent decades, however, romantic liaisons between heroes have grown to be a staple in most crime fiction sub-genres. This has contributed to broadening the appeal of crime fiction to new audiences.

While Brown's and Larsson's women protagonists can hardly be considered submissive or weak, it is clear that Brown relies more on traditional gender stereotypes. Langdon is the action hero and also takes on a progressively stronger position in deciphering the riddles, until he finally solves the mystery on his own, with Neveu placed in a more passive role (cf. Bergman, 2011, p. 96). Larsson rather inverts traditional gender dynamics, conferring on Blomkvist more traditionally female traits, with Salander acting as the action hero, who rescues the captured Blomkvist from the serial killer (cf. Kärholm, 2012, p. 151). In spite of this, their working relationship tends to be gender equal, something an international audience might also expect, and accept, from a Swedish novel; and to international women readers, this is likely part of the novel's attraction.

Larsson's novel has a clear feminist agenda, aiming to criticize and raise awareness of structural and physical violence toward women. The theme persists throughout the trilogy, though it is perhaps most explicit in the story about Salander and in the first novel's case of the serial killer. Brown's novel, too, can be said to have a feminist theme at its core: the battle over the truth about the sacred feminine and the descendants of Jesus Christ, with it being argued that an ancient truth has been covered up by the patriarchal Christian Church to suppress women. Brown's and Larsson's novels thus, at least to some extent, challenge the male paradigm traditionally dominating the crime fiction genre and advocate modern ideas about gender equality while criticizing suppression of women in society. Both novels have received extensive criticism for their feminist ambitions – Brown primarily from religious circles accusing him of distorting historical facts, Larsson mainly from feminist fractions arguing that the novel cannot be feminist due to the explicit portrayal of violence against women, which is considered to be anti-feminist by default. None of the novels do, however, present *radical* feminist ideas, and this has enabled read-

ers to find them “refreshing” without feeling too provoked. Still, these perspectives have probably added to the novels’ appeal, particularly for women readers.

The protagonists of both novels also share in common that they are dealing with personal vendettas, which is most obvious in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. Blomkvist wants to prove his innocence after being convicted for libel over the Wennerström affair, something which he is able to do with the aid of Salander, who also helps him publicize Wennerström’s crimes. Salander herself is raped by her legal guardian and eventually takes revenge on him and reverses their power relations. Additionally, throughout the trilogy, she investigates her own past, finding out more about what happened to her as a child, and eventually confronts her father and, during a trial, exposes the fraction within the secret police that had protected him. In the end, she finally acquires the legal status she has been denied. In the case of Brown, it is primarily Neveu who has a personal vendetta, with Langdon assisting her in her mission to find out who killed her grandfather. Vendettas and personal missions like these are commonly used in crime fiction as motifs behind the crimes committed. However, when associated with the hero, they are rather reminiscent of the quest tales common in adventure stories, which is particularly pertinent to Brown’s novel, where the journey combined with the search for the Holy Grail is evocative of both classical quest tales and modern adventure stories. The vendetta motif increases the reader’s emotional attachment and support for the fictional character, and thus contributes to the page-turning qualities of the novels.

While Larsson’s protagonists, despite being amateur detectives, work primarily in the manner of hard-boiled private detectives, those of Brown are more clearly inspired by the heroes of the action/political thriller tradition. A specificity shared by all four heroes is that they are driven by strong, personal codes of ethics, particularly common among the hard-boiled PIs of the American tradition, whereas, for example, political thriller heroes are more often characterized by loyalty to their employers. Both authors are also very detailed in the description of how the detectives conduct their investigations and of how the cases progress, which is reminiscent of the police procedural’s accounting of process details. This is a way to further make the reader feel involved in the story, as if

partaking in the investigation, and it is an important part of the attraction behind police and other procedural series. Additionally, hunches, instincts, and gut feelings help the four heroes navigate among clues and dangers throughout the novels. While common to many crime fiction detectives, it is perhaps particularly characteristic of the middle-aged male detectives of the police genre.

Revolutionary spirits – and a touch of political criticism, exoticism, and religion

Both Brown's and Larsson's novels blend fiction with reality by framing their stories with references to "facts": Brown as he initially informs the reader about The Priory of Sion and Opus Dei, establishing that "descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate" (Brown, 2004, p. [1]); and Larsson by introducing each of the four main parts of his novel by relating Swedish statistics about violent crimes against women.⁸ This serves to bring the novels closer to the world of the reader – that is, making it easier to believe and engage in the fiction and to accept the often critical perspectives of society and established authorities presented in the novels.

In general, both novels show skepticism toward authorities. Indeed, more generally, from governments with double agendas in political thrillers to corruption among the highest ranks of the police in police procedurals and hard-boiled crime fiction, a mistrust of authority is very common in the genre of crime fiction. Brown and Larsson are especially critical of their portrayal of the police. In *The Da Vinci Code*, the French police hunt Langdon for a murder he did not commit, with the leading police officer connected with some of the villains, while in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, the police fail to solve the girl's disappearance and never realize there is a serial killer at work. Furthermore, the primary villains throughout *The Millennium Trilogy* are revealed as a fraction within the Swedish secret police. Both authors are also critical of other institutions. Brown primarily targets the Catholic Church and Opus Dei; Larsson critiques modern capitalism, the corrupt financial market, and the media (primarily the tabloids and financial journalists). The distrust of established authorities creates a sense of us-against-them, where it is easy for a reader to identify with the individual against the more abstract/distant powers. In a time of economic crisis, globalization,

and a generally changing world, this might be attractive to many people in today's society, and has, furthermore, likely contributed to the present general rise in the popularity of crime fiction.

An additional aspect is that the heroes of both novels have a tendency not only to hide things from the police, but they also even break the law in order to make headway in their investigations and/or to avoid being captured. In crime fiction from the early and mid-20th century, law-breaking detectives were primarily found in the hard-boiled tradition, while they tended to be more law-abiding in most other sub-genres. However, a declining respect for the law can be seen in most types of more recent crime fiction. The rationale for crime fiction heroes breaking the law stems from their actions benefiting the greater good, such as catching a murderer, staying alive, or preventing another, more serious crime. When the heroes go against the rules – as when Salander uses her skills as a hacker or when Langdon tricks the police to escape from the Louvre – it enhances the suspense experienced by the readers. Even though the reader is generally “positioned” to perceive these crimes as committed for a good cause, and thus not condemning the actions of the hero, the risk that they could be caught by the police for doing something illegal is added to the long list of things that might go wrong, causing the reader to worry about – and perhaps also to cheer on – the protagonist even more.

Swedish crime fiction in particular has a reputation for containing social and political criticism, a tendency traced back to the police novels by Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö (1965–75). The primary object of criticism in the national tradition has been the disintegration of the Swedish welfare state. To foreign readers, the image of Sweden presented in this type of crime fiction has thus clashed with the widespread notion of Sweden as a perfectly functioning welfare society, a socialist utopia of sorts. Portraying the Swedish state as a “villain,” which Larsson to a certain extent does in his trilogy – in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, Salander's legal guardian and rapist Bjurman is the most noticeable representative of the state – is contrary to the idealized stereotype. This critical depiction of Sweden has probably increased the fascination for Swedish crime fiction among non-Swedish readers, who might get the impression that a secret truth about Sweden is being conveyed; perhaps some of these

readers even take a malicious pleasure in learning that “perfect” Sweden might not be so perfect after all.

Today it is almost the rule in crime fiction that motifs for murder are traced back not only to the childhood of the characters, but often even further back, to historical times and events. Brown and Larsson both follow this pattern – the former basing his story in the history of religion, the latter in the history of industrialism in modern 20th-century Sweden – with past mysteries reemerging into the present and posing new dangers. Larsson begins with what could be defined as a historical crime: the unsolved disappearance of a girl in the 1960s. However, in the investigation, Salander observes that “This may have started out as a historical mystery,” but now “we can be sure we’re on somebody’s trail” (Larsson, 2011, p. 331). Similarly, Brown’s protagonists repeatedly reflect upon the connections between the past and present, questioning whether the Catholic Church would really be prepared to countenance murder so as to prevent the Grail documents from being made public.

While Brown’s novel is permeated by the theme of religion, the main mystery in Larsson’s novel also has a religious element to it, as Bible verses prove to be the key in revealing that a serial killer is on the loose. From almost being “banned” from crime fiction, seen as contradicting factual logic, religion has become increasingly prominent in the genre in recent decades (Hansen, 2012, *passim*). Elaborate religious motifs and patterns have been important in serial killer thrillers. Nonetheless, Brown and Larsson both maintain a somewhat critical, or at least skeptical, distance from religion, avoiding association with any branch of faith or pedalling specific religious beliefs that could potentially scare off readers.

Concluding remarks

Marketing efforts aside, in examining the texts of the two novels it is clear that they share in common certain features that might have contributed to their enormous success. In particular, Brown and Larsson use many different genre conventions that enable a strong sense of reader identification with the detective characters. Can these observations be used as a guide on how to write a forthcoming hyper-bestseller? Of course not, but it is nevertheless likely that many of the common, genre-related features identified above can also be found in other hyper-bestsellers from the recent past

– and will probably be found in equally successful works in the near future.

Reading the *Harry Potter* series as a “generic game,” Altman concludes that

Rowling has created something new: a generic mosaic made up of numerous individual pieces combined in a way that allows them to keep their original shape while constantly changing their significance. The ways in which these pieces operate vary and change depending on the generic tags being interpreted at any given time by any particular reader. (Altman, 2009, p. 221)

This allows for a wide range of readers to appreciate and feel engaged in her work. I would suggest that Brown and Larsson have both accomplished something very similar to Rowling’s “genre mosaic.” Although it is not possible to draw decisive conclusions from the examination of only two examples, it should be noted that these are not just *any* two examples. Brown’s and Larsson’s novels have become two of the most successful international hyper-best-sellers of the past decade. Additionally, they are probably *the* two most successful examples principally aimed at an adult audience (unlike *Harry Potter*, *Twilight*, or *The Hunger Games*). Published in the early 2000s, both Larsson and Brown benefited from the fact that knowledgeable readers/consumers were ready for a new type of novel, one which involved a more elaborate use of different crime fiction sub-genres.

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Notes

- 1 I have borrowed, translated, and further developed the term *hyper-bestseller* (*hyperbästsäljare*) from Berglund (2012). The reason for suggesting the new term is that previously existing terms – such as for example the term *world literature*, as used by Damrosch (2003) – tend to be too inclusive and/or exclusive, and, additionally, give the wrong connotations. Meanwhile, the term *hyper-bestseller* is focused on the size, explosive expansion, and popular nature of the phenomenon at hand, and is not limited in terms of transnational and trans-medial factors.
- 2 Some of my observations concerning Larsson's novel have previously been presented more extensively in Bergman (2013). Although *The Da Vinci Code* phenomenon extends beyond that novel, to Brown's whole oeuvre or at least to all his Langdon novels, I will still refer to it as *The Da Vinci Code* phenomenon, thus stressing the importance of that very novel.
- 3 An important predecessor is Umberto Eco's *Il nome della rosa* (1980; *The Name of the Rose* [1983]). In this context, I use "genre" to define, for ex-

ample, crime fiction, romance, fantasy, and science fiction, while “sub-genre” refers to categories such as the whodunit, psychological thriller, hard-boiled crime fiction, and police procedural. When claiming that a motif or an element of narration is common in a certain genre or sub-genre, I refer to the typical “pure,” “text book” version of the genre or sub-genre – an ideal version that is rarely found in practice anymore. Since this belongs more to encyclopedia-type knowledge, knowledge repeated in common textbooks on the genre, I have omitted references to texts on the different genres and sub-genres.

- 4 I am aware that this is a simplification. Popular genres have always been mixed to some extent, although this practice has increased substantially in the last few decades. Still, it is very useful to be able to speak of genres and sub-genres in terms of their “classic” form, whether it ever existed as “pure” or not, and most people familiar with crime fiction have no problem making the relevant associations when encountering terms such as for example whodunit, police procedural, or spy thriller (cf. previous note).
- 5 Still, there is a big difference between those novels which might mix elements from two or maybe three genres or sub-genres, and hyper-bestseller phenomena like *Harry Potter* or *The Millennium Trilogy* that mix elements from a much larger number of genres and sub-genres.
- 6 The two novels are similar in terms of protagonists, main plot construction, genre associations, the strong focus on religious and cultural contexts, the “Old Europe” settings, and so on. On the back of the success of *The Da Vinci Code*, *Angels & Demons* also sold numerous copies, was adapted into a popular film (2009, directed by Ron Howard), and became part of what is the *Da Vinci Code* phenomenon.
- 7 For a more extensive discussion of codes and puzzles as the narrative force in *The Da Vinci Code*, see Bergman, 2011, pp. 95–96.
- 8 The mixture of fact and fiction is also something Altman stresses as one of Rowling’s strengths in the *Harry Potter* series (Altman, 2009, p. 214).